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Contested cooperation: the ethnic-German welfare cooperatives in the Vojvodina (1930s)

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ABSTRACT

Although the ethnic-German cooperative union in the Vojvodina, operating as a branch of the political minority movement, was designed to embrace as many economic and social organizations with ethnic-German members as possible, it did not remain united. The discord began with the establishment of welfare cooperatives as successors to former voluntary burial associations. The central organization of the ethnic-German welfare cooperatives, the Zewoge, was founded under the auspices of the ethnic-German cooperative union in 1931 and became the focal point for the former burial associations as well as newly established local welfare cooperatives. The driving force behind this development was Johann Wüschet who came into conflict with the physicians' section of the ethnic-German cultural organization. This began a process of separation of the Zewoge from the ethnic-German cooperative union. The Serbian union of welfare cooperatives assisted the Zewoge in gaining and securing its independence from the ethnic-German cooperative union in Novi Sad. This was surprising since Wüschet, the top manager of the Zewoge, announced that the ethnic Germans were involved in a demographic struggle with the Serbs in the Vojvodina. For strengthening the position of the minority, he advocated measures spanning from social hygiene to eugenics.

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Introduction: cleavage of a minority

This article deals with the ethnic-German welfare cooperatives (Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften, short form: Wogen) in the Vojvodina in the 1930s. Although a contribution about welfare cooperatives might seem out of place in a special issue about voluntary associations, in fact they shared some significant features. First, both the welfare cooperatives and some voluntary associations aimed at the social care of their recipients, and were run along non-profit lines. Therefore, considering the historical roots, the statutory goals and the concrete practices of the welfare cooperatives under examination, in this article I will use the notion

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of voluntary associations in a broader sense, to include the welfare cooperatives of the German minority in interwar Yugoslavia.

Secondly, this article will demonstrate that, for a considerable part, the welfare cooperatives under study here derived from a certain type of voluntary association, that is, the burial associations that could be found among the German minority in the Vojvodina after the First World War. Though the Vojvodina was, at that time, not an administrative entity, it can serve as an analytical category, because these former parts of Hungary (Baranja, Bačka and the western Banat) shared some common features in terms of economic development and social composition.¹ In the early 1930s, the German minority in the Vojvodina amounted to approximately 377,000 people.² Not all of them were adherents of the political minority movement and its cultural organization Kulturbund, as well as the Party of the Germans.³ Before the outbreak of the First World War, the political parameters in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were not favourable to an activism that was oriented towards Germany. After the end of the First World War, Novi Sad emerged as the geographical centre of the movement for promoting an ethnic-German identity. Hence, it was in Novi Sad that prominent ethnic-German activists of the minority movement founded the Agraria, a cooperative for trading agricultural utilities and produce, in the autumn of 1922.⁴

It was at this point, after the Kulturbund and the Party of the Germans (Landesdeutsche Partei) had been established at the beginning of the 1920s, that the organized ethnic-German movement entered the cooperative scene in Yugoslavia. The Agraria formed a union and integrated already existing local cooperatives. Since 1925 it had established its own local branches, the “Bauernhilfen”. Step by step, the Agraria developed into a diversified cooperative system. In 1927 the cooperative bank Landwirtschaftliche Zentral-Darlehenskasse (LZDK) emerged from the Agraria. One of the crucial tasks of the LZDK was to carry out the frequent audits of all local and central cooperatives belonging to the ethnic-German union. Although it was the LZDK that became the supervising centre of this cooperative union, the whole union was still commonly referred to by the name ‘Agraria’, which had been the nucleus and kept on existing as the central cooperative for trading field products and agricultural utilities. Accordingly, I will use the contemporary colloquial term ‘Agraria’ (with inverted commas) as short form for the ethnic-German union under supervision of the LZDK.

Generally speaking, until the outbreak of the Second World War, the attention given by the Yugoslav authorities to the ethnic-German cooperative system in a political sense was rather limited. This was due to the fact that the Yugoslav cooperative landscape was divided along different political currents. The major Yugoslav and Serbian cooperative unions were strongholds of the Serbian agrarian party (Savez zemljoradnika) and thus not under the political control of the two leading parties, the Serbian Radicals and Yugoslav Democrats, whose staunch support was essential to the monarchy.⁵ The Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska seljačka stranka, HSS) also tried to establish its own cooperative system. However, because the HSS called for national autonomy, the Serbian power elite considered its cooperative system to be more harmful to the South Slav state than the cooperative system of the German minority.⁶ The Party of the Germans, in contrast, sided with few exceptions with the two main loyalist parties (the “parties of the royal court”, as the Radicals and Democrats were called).⁷

Rather than being a point of conflict between the state authorities and their minority representatives, the ethnic-German welfare cooperatives in the first Yugoslavia became instead

an instrument of the power struggles within the minority.⁸ This contribution describes – from the perspective of minority activists – the circumstances and expectations of the establishment of the welfare cooperatives (Wogen) in the early 1930s. Through the newly founded central body of the welfare cooperatives, the Zentrale Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft (Zewoge), the ethnic-German cooperative union tried to gather as many Wogen as possible under its wing. The ethnic-German cooperative system was closely linked to the political and cultural leadership of the German minority in Yugoslavia. In the early 1930s, conflicts emerged between the old guard of the cooperative system and younger activists of the Zewoge, which was initially a part of the ethnic-German cooperative union supervised by the LZDK. Under the influence of these youngsters, the Zewoge began to distance itself from the 'Agraria'. This is the point at which, as I will show in this article, the Serbian welfare cooperative union in Belgrade (the Savez zdravstvenih zadruga) played a decisive role in the Zewoge's move for independence from the 'Agraria'. The local Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften (Wogen, singular Woge) provided public health care for their members. This was an attractive service for the rural working class, and thus the local Wogen, which were associated with the Zewoge, represented promising potential for extending the political influence to hitherto neglected parts of the population. Accordingly, cooperatives became contested ground among prominent activists of the German minority.

First steps: the heritage of non-profit associations

The first generation of ethnic-German welfare cooperatives in the Vojvodina, founded at the initiative of Johann Wüsch (1897–1976) in 1930, emerged partly from former non-profit associations. The impulse for this initiative came from the political leadership of the German minority, which was closely linked to a regional cooperative system ('Agraria'). This cooperative system attempted to include as many people of German origin as possible. By enlarging the cooperative system, its purported aim was to create – alongside the Party of the Germans in Yugoslavia and the cultural organization Kulturbund – an economic structure for the minority that could provide a supplementary organizational pillar, in case the official authorities should decide to impose political or cultural restrictions.⁹

After the Agraria, the trading department and nucleus of the cooperative system, had managed to obtain half a million Reichsmarks (RM) from Germany in 1925, it turned to address the peasants, who suffered from falling prices for their produce, by handing out loans.¹⁰ Consequently, in the second half of the 1920s the number of members rose and ethnic-German cooperatives spread throughout the Vojvodina. A cornerstone in this process was the foundation of the Landwirtschaftliche Zentral-Darlehenskasse (LZDK), the cooperative bank, in the spring of 1927. This financial institution, equipped with another half-a-million RM from Germany, contributed to the establishment of new local branches. However, the expansion of the 'Agraria' was not welcomed by everyone. The policy of the German minority movement, which consisted of the political party, the Kulturbund and the 'Agraria', aimed to a large extent to counter strong nationalistic Hungarian and Croatian influences on the 'Swabians' (that is, ethnic Germans) in the Vojvodina. During the 1920s the ethnic entrepreneurs of the South Slav kingdom began competing with each other for followers from among the population, which was in many cases ethnically not clearly defined. Assimilations or hybrid identities were not rare among citizens of the young Yugoslav state.¹¹

The next step of the management was to attract those ethnic-Germans into the cooperatives that did not own an agricultural business, and this is where the welfare cooperatives came into play. In terms of numbers of members, the ethnic-German cooperative system was ahead of the Kulturbund at the turn of the 1930s. This was largely due to the restrictions introduced by the authorities under the so-called royal dictatorship of King Alexander I. After the dissolution of the parliament, and the suspension of the constitution in early 1929, political parties and organizations with an ethnic minority, non-Slavic or oppositional nationalist background like the HSS were banned, and this also applied to the German Party and the Kulturbund. While the German Party was never re-established, the Kulturbund remained on stand-by. The only German minority organization that managed to remain fully intact was the 'Agraria'. During the period in which the Kulturbund was banned, the cooperative system expanded throughout the Vojvodina, and founded 19 local cooperatives in the first half of 1930. The ethnic-German cooperative union had almost 13,000 members, while the Kulturbund, which resumed its activities in the spring of 1931, had some 9000 registered adherents.¹²

A promising social group for the recruitment of new members to the cooperatives was the landless population of the Vojvodina. Though most of the landless people were Magyars, it was assumed that almost one-third of the ethnic Germans in the region belonged to this social group.¹³ The considerable proportion of landless people was a result of the prevailing customs of succession by which the oldest son of a farmer's family was designated heir to the entire estate. Many adult males were thus left without their own farmland. After they had been paid their portion of the inheritance, many tried to make a living as manual workers or day labourers.¹⁴

The strong presence of landless ethnic Germans in the Vojvodina convinced the minority leadership in Novi Sad to foster the creation of cooperatives for the rural working class and thus combat the self-organization of agrarian workers inclined to follow leftist ideas. The regional influence of the Serbian Peasant Party (Savez zemljoradnika), which had just undergone a strengthening of its pro-Socialist fraction, was about to grow. Around mid-1928 the Savez zemljoradnika embarked on an ambitious campaign in the Vojvodina, calling for the rural proletariat to be relieved from indebtedness.¹⁵ In addition, the Serbian Peasant Party did not forget the ethnic minorities of the region, and released newspapers in Hungarian and German.¹⁶ The ethnic-German movement felt pressurized by these activities because it feared losing part of its potential followers to the Serbian agrarian movement. In the early 1930s, the poverty in rural areas had reached shocking levels. Jobless people wandered around the countryside, seeking an opportunity to obtain food and shelter.¹⁷ Under these conditions, every effort that led to an improvement of the situation was welcome.

The administration in Berlin, which took care of the clandestine financial resources directed from Germany to economic minority organizations in Eastern Europe, had sent Karl Fütterer, an expert on cooperatives, as a consultant to the 'Agraria'. He explored possibilities for incorporating non-profit associations, founded for supporting the bereaved in cases of burials, into the ethnic-German cooperative system. The impetus that drove these associations into the open arms of organized regional Germanism was a decision by the Yugoslav government that forced them to change their legal status from non-profit associations into commercial insurance companies. This meant for them the loss of their privileges, for example, exemption from taxation, which for many (if not most) implied the cessation of their operations. The 'Agraria', however, provided a solution by offering to turn

the associations into welfare cooperatives.¹⁸ The leading figure who was entrusted with this task was Johann Wüsch. ¹⁹

From expansion to division

Originally, Wüsch had been an activist of the labour movement in the Vojvodina. Around 1928/29, assisted by the Serbian Democratic Party, he began establishing ethnic-German workers' associations. He cultivated good relations with members of the regional Serbian elite and criticized the Kulturbund for its one-sided focus on wealthy farmers.¹⁹ However, Wüsch was not against reforming the structures he spoke ill of; in early 1930, Stephan Kraft (1884–1959), the most influential politician of the German minority in Yugoslavia and the president of the cooperative bank LZDK, succeeded in hiring Wüsch for the social section of the Kulturbund.²⁰ First, Wüsch helped to establish rural workers' savings cooperatives in Bačka.²¹ Next, he inaugurated the Zewoge foundation in order to provide a roof for the isolated welfare cooperatives and attach them to the ethnic-German union. In coordination with Johann Keks (1883–1947), head of the Kulturbund, he managed to convert 24 former non-profit burial associations into welfare cooperatives, which all joined the Zewoge.²² At this early stage, through the Zewoge these newly acquired cooperatives (Wogen) still belonged to the network of the 'Agraria', which was under supervision of the LZDK.

Immediately after its foundation Wüsch became secretary of the Zewoge and continued to establish dispensaries for medical treatment in rural settlements.²³ This initiative was inspired by the Serbian health cooperatives, originally organized by the medical doctor Gavriilo Kojić.²⁴ The Serbian welfare cooperative system (Savez zdravstvenih zadruga), founded in 1922, had some 13,000 members by mid-1928.²⁵ Public health services in the Vojvodina improved considerably throughout the 1920s, but it was nevertheless hardly available for the average person in rural areas.²⁶ Tuberculosis, for example, was so widespread that it contributed to one in 10 deaths.²⁷ Because more than 80% of the population had no health insurance,²⁸ the service provided by the Wogen fulfilled a basic need of the people. Until late 1931 Wüsch succeeded in founding 28 new Wogen.²⁹ Registration into a Woge cost only 10 Dinars, and a subsequent monthly fee of five Dinars, and meant that a member's entire family could benefit from drastically reduced costs for diagnosis and health care.³⁰ This practical advantage drew a great many people into the organizations of the Wogen. For instance, the Wogen in Stari Sivač, Novi Sivač and Sonta had a total of 3000 members, even in their early stages.³¹

The Wogen's most striking example, however, was located in Bačko Dobro Polje, where 1369 members set out to equip a small-scale hospital. However, instead of giving its approval, or even appreciation, the Kulturbund forced the Woge of Bačko Dobro Polje to close the ward,³² under pressure from the physicians' section within the Kulturbund. The doctors were afraid of losing patients – and money. In reaction, Wüsch accelerated the integration of the Zewoge into the Serbian union of welfare cooperatives, the Savez zdravstvenih zadruga (or Savez for short).³³ In late 1930, the government required all welfare cooperatives in Yugoslavia to enter the umbrella organization in Belgrade.³⁴ Most probably under the impetus of Wüsch, the union with Belgrade forced the managing committee to resign. Finally, at the plenum of 17 April 1932, Zewoge's president Keks and his colleagues were dismissed.³⁵

Peter Meister, once chief manager of the short-lived Woge in Bačko Dobro Polje, became the new president of the Zewoge.³⁶ His promotion came as a triumph for the ascending activists of the Zewoge whose plans had been hindered by prominent Kulturbund personalities. After Keks had been overthrown, it became apparent that the Zewoge would be better off without the control of the LZDK. The Savez compensated the expenses for contracting an auditor. Formerly, this service had been entirely provided by the LZDK. Thus, the Zewoge was at least able to ensure the audits of the Wogen that were carried out after its break with the LZDK. Many older Wogen, however, remained under the inspection of the LZDK. A strange double-structure appeared. Officially all Wogen belonged to the Zewoge, which influenced their daily operations. But many of them were still under control of the LZDK.³⁷ Under the patronage of the Savez, the Zewoge expanded its web of local branches. Financial support from the Savez assisted the expansion. The Zewoge received roughly 10% of the 450,000 Dinars that were earmarked by the Yugoslav Ministry of Social Affairs as annual contribution for the Savez's work.³⁸

Escalation between the Zewoge and the LZDK

As it had been impossible to prevent the Zewoge from splitting from the LZDK, the latter's management attempted at the very least to prevent more burial associations from entering the Zewoge. Addressing the burial associations that were seeking a new roof, the LZDK issued an appeal not to join the Zewoge, because – as the circular read – ‘there might be the danger that the burial associations will gradually be converted into Serbian organizations’.³⁹ The leaders linked to the ‘Agraria’ regarded the staff of the Zewoge as renegades, and presented themselves as the guardians of a pure Germandom. Wüsch was informed of the campaign and began to retaliate,⁴⁰ targeting Karl Leser. Leser had been sent to Novi Sad by the Berlin-based organization which directed secret funds to the German minorities. He served as an undercover trustee of the Austrian bank that had forwarded credits from Germany to the LZDK. The monetary means had been transferred through a bank outside Germany in order to divert the Yugoslav authorities away from its true origin – the Reich. Wüsch regarded Leser as ‘an annoying foreigner’ and saw him as responsible for the interventions of the LZDK.⁴¹

It was while seeking to strengthen his position against the old guard that Wüsch came across Alfred Čebular, the ousted inspector of the Yugoslav cooperative union who had been working on the ‘Agraria’. Like Wüsch, he was also disappointed with the old guard because there had been tension with Kraft, leading to his dismissal. In order to prevent the official inscription of former burial associations into the register of the LZDK, Wüsch attempted in vain to use Čebular's contacts with the regional authorities to his advantage. After this disappointment, Wüsch turned to his Serbian superiors of the Savez. The latter pleaded with the Yugoslav cooperative union to carry out an audit of the ethnic-German cooperative system. This step endangered Leser's position, because there was a considerable risk that the Yugoslav authorities would discover his true institutional background. The staff of the German Embassy in Belgrade was afraid that the Reich's financial involvement in the ‘Agraria’ could be exposed,⁴² and Leser came close to being withdrawn from his post. The leadership of the ‘Agraria’ denounced Wüsch to the German embassy for being a ‘staunch supporter of Socialism’.⁴³ The staff of the embassy came to the conclusion that Wüsch's

activities had been 'detrimental to the interests of Germandom in this place',⁴⁴ and he was summoned to appear at the embassy and give his statement.⁴⁵

Rapprochement

Both ethnic-German central cooperatives, the LZDK and the Zewoge, were in competition with each other to gain control of as many Wogen as possible. Despite the LZDK's setbacks, in 1933 the number of members in the Zewoge doubled.⁴⁶ At the end of the year they reached almost 40,000.⁴⁷ Most of its members belonged to the rural working class, whereas the 'Bauernhilfen' founded by the 'Agraria' were predominantly made up of farm owners.⁴⁸ The managers of the 'Agraria', who were trying to attract as many members as possible, were aware of the complementary character of the Zewoge, which made it even harder to accept its independence. Thus the 'Agraria', for its part, was willing to bring about a rapprochement. The lower ranks even criticized the actions of the LZDK against the Zewoge.⁴⁹ It was hardly possible to ignore what the Zewoge had achieved in terms of public health care among the ethnic Germans. By the mid-1930s, the Zewoge was made up of 45 local cooperatives, nine disease-prevention clinics and four kindergartens.⁵⁰ Keks, who chaired the Kulturbund, put in a good word at the embassy. He stated that Wüscht was 'able-minded', but had 'an ill-controlled temper'.⁵¹ Presenting these quarrels as simply conflicts in personal character diminished the fact that they were actually about power, influence and consequently access to socio-economic resources.

The Zewoge's readiness to enter into negotiations with the LZDK was partly due to its need to secure itself favourable conditions for the mandatory audits. With the rising numbers of affiliated cooperatives – and accordingly rising costs – this had become an important issue.⁵² Another motivation for meeting at the negotiating table was the desire to put business relations, which had become tense since the split, in order.⁵³ Seeing himself to be in a strong position, Wüscht demanded the dissolution of the physicians' section of the Kulturbund and an 'enquiry into the incidents', referring to the LZDK's intervention to prevent former burial associations from joining the Zewoge.⁵⁴ An enquiry was unacceptable to Kraft, who provided the medical doctors with professional opportunities, trying to gain loyal adherents. Wüscht and Kraft relented after Keks had mediated between them.⁵⁵ Many regional physicians of German extraction were in any case on the point of giving up their resistance against the Zewoge, having realized that a broader social-security system would lead to an increase in medical treatment, and accordingly to an increase in income opportunities for them. True to the saying 'if you can't beat them, join them', 21 physicians were on the payroll of the Wogen in 1936, climbing to 27 in late 1937.⁵⁶ They earned more than twice as much as their colleagues working for the official health-care system.⁵⁷

In 1935 the Zewoge re-instated business relations with the LZDK, facilitated by the fact that, at least on an organizational level, Wüscht had kept his distance with the 'Erneuerer' (literally: 'Renewers'). 'Erneuerer' was used as a collective term for younger adherents of the German minority movement who were aiming for a takeover of the established minority organizations. Their own organizations were modelled on Nazi ideology.⁵⁸ However, the distance between Wüscht and the Erneuerer stood less on ideological than on materialistic grounds. Jakob Awender (1897–1975), one of the leading Erneuerer, was a doctor by profession and thus initially an opponent of the Wogen, because he principally saw the welfare cooperatives as competitors.⁵⁹ Soon, however, the tensions eased, not least because

the Wogen were concentrated in Bačka, whereas Awender and his followers were mostly situated in Banat.⁶⁰ Soon Wüscht and the Erneuerer discovered a common goal, and in any case the statutes of the Erneuerer, released in 1935, demanded the 'establishment and extension of cooperative welfare'.⁶¹

Blood, population and soil: the ideological set

Although Wüscht did not belong to any Erneuerer organization, in 1933 a representative of a nationalist student group from Leipzig already considered him 'totally national-socialist-minded'.⁶² Shortly after the National-Socialist takeover in Germany, student organizations began to collaborate with the Zewoge.⁶³ It seems that the ideological similarities between these visitors from the Reich and Wüscht were strong, especially when compared to the rather conservative views of the established leaderships of the Kulturbund and the 'Agraria'.⁶⁴ Wüscht was influenced by the demographers Vladan Jojkić and Friedrich Burgdörfer,⁶⁵ the latter an outspoken advocate of eugenics. Jojkić was a Serbian nationalist who projected his demographic views against a territorial background. In his 1931 work, which was largely based on statistical data,⁶⁶ entitled *The Nationalization of Bačka and Banat*, he had examined the strategic value of the Vojvodina, which was economically more developed than most other parts of Yugoslavia, in regard to the vital interests of the state. Jojkić came to the conclusion that the living conditions of the Slavs in the region were critical, and he asked how the Slavic people's position could be reinforced. Wüscht adapted Jojkić's views in his writings for the case of the German minority.

The threat of the 'death of the ethnic group' ('Volkstod') was also a scenario fundamental to Burgdörfer's views.⁶⁷ Wüscht also applied this interpretation to the regional context of the Vojvodina. Every slight decline in the German population was regarded as proof for its endangerment.⁶⁸ He was afraid that the Germans in the Vojvodina would be ousted by the neighbouring peoples and supported his claims by presenting figures of declining birth rates. In reality, this decline was a common phenomenon since the popularization of conscious family planning in the late nineteenth century, beginning in European and North American countries.⁶⁹ In the mid-1930s, Wüscht came to the conclusion that in 13 of the 37 ethnic-German communities in Bačka, mortality outweighed natality rates. He referred to this phenomenon as the 'white plague'.⁷⁰ A deficit of births against deaths was not necessarily specific to the ethnic Germans; other regional ethnicities were also affected by a drop in birth rates.⁷¹ However, according to Wüscht, a 'struggle for procreation' was being waged between the ethnic communities in the Vojvodina.⁷²

Wüscht saw abortions as the root of the problem. In many cases, poorer women could not afford effective birth control. As a result, they resorted to unprofessional abortion methods, endangering their health and their ability to give birth in the future.⁷³ Another factor was the high mortality rate among children. One in five new-born children, according to Wüscht's observations, fell victim to an infant mortality that could have been avoided. There were, however, significant differences in the infant mortality rates between different settlements. Srpski Miletić, Wüscht's birthplace, was a particularly sad example, where only half of new-borns survived into childhood.⁷⁴ Examining these grave conditions fuelled his fear of an approaching 'Volkstod'.

Wüscht's zeal for improving the health conditions, however, did not only run along humanitarian lines; he also had higher political purposes in mind. To him, it was clear

that the ethnic Germans were not living for their own sake. In the eyes of an ideologist like Wüsch, who followed an ethno-nationalistic view, their uppermost task was to defend and enlarge the 'ethnic-German soil' ('Volksboden').⁷⁵ Wüsch's concerns were motivated against this background. In response to the question 'to whom will the soil belong one day?'⁷⁶ and combined with the signs of decreasing population rates he had identified in mind, he gave the following recommendations for protecting the territory inhabited by ethnic Germans: 'The true protection of the soil lies, not only in a high level of economic culture and in the merging of organizations, but potentially in large peasant families.'⁷⁷ With this statement, he underlined the point at which his concept of an ethnically exclusive cooperative system went a step beyond the classical scheme of German cooperatives in Eastern Europe.⁷⁸ Since the mid-1920s, the official German foreign policy had followed an informal doctrine of preventing an exodus of minority Germans.⁷⁹ There were systematic efforts to preserve German settlements in the East, even those that suffered from particularly adverse living conditions; financial means were distributed by a semi-governmental administration in Berlin and forwarded through clandestine channels to the leaders of minority cooperatives.⁸⁰ It was of great importance to the men behind the monetary transfers that these leaders belong to the organized movement that represented the German minority at a political level.⁸¹ Whereas the classical expansionist concept mainly pushed German land possession, Wüsch intensified efforts to multiply and maintain the German minority by adding to this the factors of 'blood' (that is, genetic foundations) and biological reproduction. Health care and the improvement of fertility were presented as a means to reinforce the minority's presence in the Vojvodina.

In order to illustrate the need for eugenics measures, Wüsch gave the example of an ethnic-German community of 3900 people, where he counted 'no less than 83 serious cases of mentally inferior individuals, idiots and stupid people, mostly stemming from genetically strained parents.'⁸² In general, ethnicity ranked first among individual parameters, when it came to choice of marriage partners.⁸³ This pattern of endogamy had led to intermarrying among relatives, leading to a higher risk of genetically affected descendants.⁸⁴ As counter-measures Wüsch suggested promoting an awareness of family genealogy by exchanging ancestry trees. An increased 'consciousness of the race' seemed to him to provide a solution.⁸⁵

The gender aspect

If only male members had been involved in the work of the Wogen, there could, of course, hardly have been realistic prospects for the application of Wüsch's ethno-nationalistic programme. Without the inclusion of women, little could have been achieved in this field. Women were central to Wüsch's stated desire of overcoming the unwanted side effects of the social circumstances and behaviours mentioned above: genetic degeneration; declining fertility; and increasing infant mortality. In 1933, the Zewoge's journal, *Wohlfahrt und Gesundheit* ('Welfare and Health', established in 1932) announced that 'the question of reproduction is no longer a secret of the bedroom, but an open problem of the existence of our people.'⁸⁶ After the German minority's farmland had become a tool for bringing about the revisionist leanings of pan-Germanic plans, the generation that succeeded the established minority leadership, especially Wüsch and the Erneuerer, declared the wombs of 'Swabian' women to be an object of ethno-politics.⁸⁷ Although the position of women was central to the success of the methods suggested by Wüsch, by their involvement, the Wogen did

not aim for female empowerment. The idea of maintaining women in an inferior position was in keeping with the programme of the Erneuerer, which envisaged 'the integration of woman into the [exclusively] ethnic community ['Volksgemeinschaft'] ... by allocating her to fields of work that suit her nature.'⁸⁸

The Zewoge's aims to maintain and tighten traditional gender roles became more apparent when it began organizing lessons to 'prepare young women for their profession as mothers'.⁸⁹ These activities resembled the 'service to the race' of the National-Socialist People's Welfare organization (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt) which had been founded in Germany in 1933.⁹⁰ At an assembly of the Zewoge in the summer of 1936, Katharina Haag from Bukin in the Vojvodina appealed to her female audience, 'to refrain from the materialistic view of life' and 'energetically contribute to the future of our ethnic group [Volk]'.⁹¹ Haag was rewarded for this ethno-political statement with an internship at the renowned Virchow clinic in Berlin.⁹² The exchange of personnel went in both directions. Professionals of the 'Reichsmütterdienst' ('Reich's service for mothers') travelled to the Vojvodina in order to support the Wogen in improving the hygiene conditions of childbirth and childcare.⁹³ From the standpoint of the Wogen Germany was undoubtedly the shining example when it came to lowering infant mortality rates. The idea of social hygiene was, however, not new to the Yugoslav public. Under Uroš Krulj, the first Minister of Public Health in the royal government, a Department of Racial, Public and Social Hygiene had been created.⁹⁴ Germany was nevertheless avant-garde in this field, because it was here that the term 'social hygiene', closely connected to demography and eugenics, had already been coined in 1870 by the physician Eduard Reich.⁹⁵

Exiting the ethnic-German union of cooperatives

However, its close collaboration with agencies of the 'motherland' did not prevent the Zewoge from maintaining strong ties with the Serbian welfare cooperative union. In the late 1930s, the Zewoge drifted further away from the union of the LZDK. Despite its ethno-chauvinistic campaign, claiming that a struggle was being waged over population growth between the Germans of the Vojvodina and the regional Serbs, the Zewoge remained on excellent terms with the Serbian Savez. Even publicly, the president of the Zewoge called the Savez its 'saviour from trouble'.⁹⁶ Some Wogen in serious financial difficulties were rescued through the intervention of the Savez.⁹⁷ While it was waiting for a new law to be decreed on cooperatives, the managing board of the Zewoge decided to completely hand over the audits of the local branches to the Savez.⁹⁸ Despite 20 newly registered cooperatives of different kinds, the decisive departure of 30 Zewoge cooperatives (including 23 Wogen) was an unexpected setback for the LZDK.⁹⁹ Thus, 1938 was the only year that saw a decrease in cooperatives attached to the LZDK. While the Zewoge was collaborating with the Savez, it had adopted the stand of the extremely ethno-nationalist Erneuerer. Without necessarily having institutional ties to the Erneuerer, the Zewoge was used as an instrument to fulfil their demands for 'promoting the people's health, the pureness of the blood and the creation of favourable conditions for supporting the [biological] reproduction [of the ethnic Germans]'.¹⁰⁰ However, after the Zewoge became unambiguously attached to the Savez in 1938, Wüsch softened his tone, admitting that the Serbs were in a similar demographic position to the ethnic Germans.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Wüsch's role as principal manager of the Zewoge should be considered on three levels: practical work; ideological principles; and organizational division. The practical work done pleased the masses, the ideological principles adopted pleased the Nazis together with those who emulated them (the Erneuerer) and, not least, the organizational division introduced by Wüsch pleased the Erneuerer as well as the Serbian stakeholders in the region, because it weakened the position of the minority's old guard.

The initiative for setting up the Zewoge came, however, from the ranks of the minority movement. Although decisive encouragement from Yugoslav state institutions was not forthcoming, through its legislation, the state provided an important impulse. If it had not needed the former burial associations to join the ethnic-German cooperative union, the initial step on the way to the establishment of the Zewoge might well not have come about at all. It seems that self-organized public health care was welcomed by the authorities, because it partly relieved the state institutions of the burden of establishing and maintaining a comprehensive social system. Of course, this went so far as to ensure that the Yugoslav authorities and leading functionaries of the Serbian Savez turned a blind eye to the strong nationalist tune played by the chauvinist propaganda of the Zewoge. The initiatives of the minority which have been examined in this study complemented the Yugoslav infrastructure of health and social care. Despite significant progress in establishing health institutions, the public sector was still under development in the early 1930s. The question of how to solve the problem of comprehensive care was highly debated among Yugoslav scholars in the field of social medicine.¹⁰²

Another reason for the Serbian side's acceptance of the Zewoge despite its anti-Serbian ideology can be seen in its political intentions. The relationship between the Serbian union of welfare cooperatives and the Zewoge was openly amicable, and the Savez assisted the Zewoge whenever it needed help. It is hard to imagine that this support was not somehow motivated by a desire to drive the Zewoge further away from the LZDK. At an early stage, when the Erneuerer first appeared, it was obvious that the government of the Danube Banovina was trying to drive a wedge between certain chief organizers of the minority by granting support to one of the Erneuerer.¹⁰³ A similar motivation can be assumed for the assistance lent to the Zewoge for its separation from the LZDK. One indicator for this assumption is the support for Wüsch and for the independence of the Zewoge displayed by Čebular, the inspector from the Yugoslav cooperative union, who had formerly been sent to survey the Agraria.

Also important was the effect of Wüsch's activities on intra-ethnic relations of power. By setting up a cooperative centre that, in terms of membership numbers, surpassed the established cooperative system of the minority and cooperated with the Serbian Savez, Wüsch undermined the authority of the leading minority politician Kraft. This manoeuvring was one of among several reasons why Wüsch remained at the head of the Zewoge, while Kraft was pushed out of his post as president of the LZDK in 1939. This article was able to show how the German welfare cooperatives can be considered a part of the landscape of non-governmental organizations in interwar Yugoslavia. They specialized in health and social care for a high number of peasant families. Within its own ethnic group the Zewoge strengthened the traditional hierarchy of the sexes. Women had to fit into the scheme of

expansionist minority politics, and thus their involvement might be seen as participation without empowerment.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, the eastern parts of Srem and Slavonia might also be counted as part of the Vojvodina.
2. Calculation based on figures from Janjetović, "Die Konflikte," 132, n. 94. Still very insightful for the history of the German minority in Yugoslavia, though mostly based on the writings of minority representatives, is the work of Wehler, *Nationalitätenpolitik*. For a comparative study of the German minorities on both sides of the Banat: Hausleitner, *Die Donauschwaben*.
3. In the late 1930s, only 10% of the ethnic-Germans were members of the Kulturbund (Janjetović, "National Minorities," 72).
4. Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini*, 123–4.
5. Vučković, *Istorija*.
6. Kolar-Dimitrijević, "Gospodarstvo."
7. Gligorijević, *Parlament*, 239.
8. For a general account of the ethno-political dimension of cooperatives see Lorenz, "Introduction."
9. Robioneck, "Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit."
10. Germany had systematically supported the establishment of ethnic-German cooperatives in the East since 1924 (Robioneck, "Ethnic-German Cooperatives").
11. This can be seen in the success of the Croatian Peasant Party among ethnic Germans (Leček, "Hrvatska seljačka stranka i Nijemci"). Cf. Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten*.
12. Geiger, "Njemačka manjina," 435 f.; "Bericht der Anwaltschaft über das Berichtsjahr 1929," *Heimat*, May 25, 1930, 11.
13. Cf. Savić, *Naša industrija, zanati, trgovina i poljoprivreda*, 146; Bundesarchiv, Berlin (BA) R57 neu/328: "Zur volksbiologischen Lage der Deutschen in Südslavien," [Wüsch], 2.
14. Wolpert, *Deutsche Wirtschaft*, 182–4.
15. Jovanović, *Zemljoradnička levica*, 24–30, esp. 60.
16. Kecić, *Klasne borbe*, 132–3, 278.
17. Calic, *Sozialgeschichte*, 394–5.
18. Politisches Archiv of the Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin (PA AA) Dt. Ges. Belgrad 36/1: "Wirtschaftsorganisationen der deutschen Bauernschaft Jugoslawiens," LZDK (Riester/Hellermann), Novi Sad, Oct. 8, 1936.
19. Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten*, 392.
20. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 35/5: Keks to Dt. Ges. Belgrad [Nov. 1933].
21. "Gründung einer Spar- und Selbsthilfegenossenschaft der Landarbeiter in Karavukovo," *Deutsches Volksblatt*, March 7, 1930, 6–7; "Gründung der Landarbeiter Spar- und Selbsthilfegenossenschaft in Filipovo," *Deutsches Volksblatt*, March 13, 1930, 6.
22. Rasimus, *Als Fremde*, 441; cf. Plautz, *Das Werden*, 95.
23. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 35/5: Keks an Dt. Ges. Belgrad [Nov. 1933].
24. Isić, *Seljaštvo*, 228–9.
25. Varga, "Naše zadrukarstvo," 295.
26. Cf. Marković, "Zdravstvo," 132.
27. Harmsen, "Volksgesundheitsfragen," 78.
28. Oebser, *Das deutsche Genossenschaftswesen*, 240.
29. "Bericht der Anwaltschaft," *Der Genossenschaftler* (Deutsches Volksblatt supplement) [Oct. 1932].
30. BA R57 neu/1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936."
31. "Neue ländliche Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften," *Deutsches Volksblatt*, Dec. 19, 1930, 4.

32. Meister and Seibert, "Die Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft," 84–5.
33. PA AA R30321, 294–309: Report "Südslowien." [Fütterer], [May/June 1934], 6–7.
34. Iščić, *Seljaštvo*, 228–9.
35. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 35/5: Keks to Dt. Ges. Belgrad [Nov. 1933].
36. Rasimus, *Als Fremde*, 442.
37. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 36/1: "Wirtschaftsorganisationen der deutschen Bauernschaft Jugoslawiens," LZDK (Riester/Hellermann), Novi Sad, October 8, 1936.
38. "Das Gesetz über die Gesundheitsgenossenschaften," Deutsches Volksblatt, December 25, 1930, 8.
39. AV 111/4: LZDK (auditing department) to auditor Schmoll, February 22, 1933.
40. AV 111/6: Zewoge (Wüsch, Meister) to LZDK (board of directors), Novi Sad, September 16, 1935.
41. Quoted in AV 111/6: "Niederschrift" (handwritten), Leser [1933].
42. PA AA R60075: "Wühlarbeit in der deutschen Minderheit," Dt. Ges. Belgrad (Dufour) to AA, Belgrade, July 30, 1933.
43. AV 111/6: Protocol [Leser], Novi Sad, February 11, 1935; PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 35/5: Keks to Dt. Ges. Belgrad [Nov. 1933].
44. PA AA R60075: "Wühlarbeit in der deutschen Minderheit," Dt. Ges. Belgrad (Dufour) to AA, July 30, 1933.
45. AV 111/6: Protocol [Leser], Novi Sad, February 11, 1935.
46. Durman, "Zadugarstvo," 116.
47. Jahresbericht der Zentral-Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft, Novi Sad 1935, 7.
48. Harmsen, "Volksgesundheitsfragen," 78; "Geschäftstätigkeit der Mitgliedsgenossenschaften," *Der Landwirt*, January 1, 1935, 26.
49. AV 111/6: "RevisionsBericht. [sic!]" (handwritten), LZDK (Heidenfelder), Novi Sad, June 18, 1933.
50. "Mitteilungen aus fremden landw. Organisationen und Verbänden. Zentral-Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft," *Der Landwirt*, October 13, 1935, 404–5.
51. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 35/5: Keks to Dt. Ges. Belgrad [Nov. 1933].
52. AV 111/6: "RevisionsBericht. [sic!]" (handwritten), LZDK (Heidenfelder), Novi Sad, June 18, 1933.
53. AV 111/6: "Revisionsbericht. 'Zewoge,'" LZDK (Schmoll), Novi Sad, September 19–24, 1935.
54. AV 111/6: Zentrale Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft (Wüsch, Meister) to LZDK (board of directors), Novi Sad, September 16, 1935.
55. PA AA R30321, 294–309: Report "Südslowien." [Fütterer], [May/June 1934], 6–7.
56. BA R57neu 1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936." Cf. "Südslowien." *Der Auslandsdeutsche* 19,8 (Aug. 1936), 586.
57. Oebser, *Das deutsche Genossenschaftswesen*, 240–1.
58. Janjetović, "Die Donauschwaben," 221, fn. 7.
59. PA AA R30321, 294–309: Report "Südslowien." [Fütterer], [May/June 1934], 3–4.
60. When, in the autumn of 1937, two representatives from Banat were elected to the presidency of the Zewoge, it was considered particularly unusual (AV 111/6: "Bericht über die VII. ordentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Zewoge," [LZDK], Novi Sad, October 25, 1937).
61. BA R57neu 1070/37, 486: "Bekanntnis und Wollen der Erneuerungsbewegung" (poster), Die Kameradschaft der Erneuerungsbewegung [Pančevo], April 1935.
62. PA AA R60076: "Denkschrift über eine Studienfahrt nach Südslowien," Leiter des Hauptamtes für Grenz- und Außenpolitik der Deutschen Studentenschaft Leipzig (Urban), Leipzig, October 25, 1933.
63. Harvey, "Mobilisierung," 371–2.
64. Cf. Brocke, *Bevölkerungswissenschaft*.
65. Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten*, 159 f./394. Cf. "Südslowien," *Der Auslandsdeutsche* 20, no. 5 (May 1937): 362–70 (365). Burgdörfer aligned himself with the

National-Socialist policy of eugenics. Before 1933 he had already become one of the leading ideologists of eugenics in Germany (cf. Bryant, "Friedrich Burgdörfer").

66. Jojkić, *Nacionalizacija*.
67. Cf. Vienne, "Der prognostizierte Volkstod."
68. BA R57neu 328: "Zur volksbiologischen Lage der Deutschen in Südslavien," 3.
69. Balkenende, "The Small Wars," 173–4.
70. BA R57neu 1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936." The struggle against the 'white plague' became a public issue in the wartime Independent State of Croatia (Yeomans, "Fighting the White Plague").
71. Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten*, 159–60, cf. p. 395.
72. BA R57neu 1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936," 5.
73. BA R57neu 328: "Zur volksbiologischen Lage der Deutschen in Südslavien," 4.
74. Jahresbericht der Zentral-Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft in Novisad für das Geschäftsjahr 1934. Novi Sad 1935, 5–6.
75. Quoted in RobioneK, "Ethnic-German Cooperatives," 217.
76. BA R57neu 328: "Zur volksbiologischen Lage der Deutschen in Südslavien," 3.
77. BA R57neu 1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936."
78. Cf. RobioneK, "Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit."
79. Oltmer, "Konstruktion," 24.
80. Krekeler, *Revisionsanspruch*.
81. RobioneK, "Im Gravitationsfeld."
82. Jahresbericht der Zentral-Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaft in Novisad für das Geschäftsjahr 1934. Novi Sad 1935, 6.
83. Schramm, *Sozio-ökonomische Struktur*, 5.
84. Rüdiger, *Das Deutschtum*, 20; cf. Savić, *Naša industrija, zanati, trgovina i poljoprivreda*, 191.
85. BA R57neu 1071/52, 4273: "Jahresbericht der Zentral-Genossenschaft der Ländlichen Wohlfahrtsgenossenschaften in Novi Sad als Unterverband des Verbandes der Gesundheitsgenossenschaften in Beograd für das Geschäftsjahr 1936," 6.
86. Quoted in Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten*, 392.
87. Cf. RobioneK, "Im Gravitationsfeld."
88. BA R57neu 1070/37, 486: "Bekanntnis und Wollen der Erneuerungsbewegung" (poster), Die Kameradschaft der Erneuerungsbewegung [Pančevo], April 1935.
89. "Südslawien," *Der Auslandsdeutsche* 19, no. 8 (August 1936), 586; cf. Plautz, *Das Werden*, 96–7.
90. Quoted in Lampert, "Staatliche Sozialpolitik," 199–200.
91. Quoted in "Südslawien," *Der Auslandsdeutsche* 19, no. 8 (August 1936), 586.
92. AV 111/6: "Bericht über die VII. ordentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Zewoge," Novi Sad, October 25, 1937.
93. PA AA Dt. Ges. Belgrad 36/2: Deutsches Frauenwerk (Reichsstelle) to Dt. Ges. Belgrad, Berlin, January 10, 1938.
94. Dugac, "Like Yeast in Fermentation," 196–7.
95. Ferdinand, "Disziplinäre Grenzen."
96. Quoted in AV 111/6: "Bericht über die VII. ordentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Zewoge," Novi Sad, October 25, 1937.
97. AV 111/6: "Revisionsbericht. 'Zewoge,'" LZDK (Schmoll), Novi Sad, September 19–24, 1935.
98. AV 111/6: "Bericht über die VII. ordentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Zewoge," LZDK, Novi Sad, October 25, 1937.
99. Durman, "Zadugarstvo," 116; cf. Plautz, *Das Werden*, 94.

100. BA R57neu 1070/37, 486: "Bekenntnis und Wollen der Erneuerungsbewegung" (poster), Die Kameradschaft der Erneuerungsbewegung [Pančevo], April 1935.
101. Wüsch, "Das biologische Bild."
102. Dugac, "New Public Health."
103. Böhm, *Die deutsche Volksgruppe*, 202.

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